

Progress Report on Tri-County Highway Administration Study*

PROF. JOHN STONER
Department of Government
Indiana University
Bloomington

There are three reasons among others for studying county highway administration. The county as a governmental unit has been under attack. It has always seemed to me that when you attack an institution which is as old and which has been as useful as the county in American Government that it is worthwhile to make an impartial survey to see if there is anything wrong and if so, if there is anything which can be done to improve it. In the second place, counties are one of the most important units for the administration of local rural highways in the United States. More than 57 per cent of the total highway mileage in the country is administered by counties. In the third place, highway administration needs desperately to be understood better, and the county provides a good place to start studying it. The things one can learn about highway administration in the county will probably apply to highway administration on the state level. Consequently, most of the things that one learns about county highway administration may be applied to states.

It was determined to pick three counties each in a separate state. The object was to get counties close together so that the soil and physical conditions would be as much alike as possible, but in different states, so that the political background would be different. The advantage of doing this was to keep physical conditions steady while administrative conditions would be different. The counties chosen were Steuben in Indiana, Branch in Michigan, and Williams in Ohio.

The attempt to eliminate physical differences was not very successful. For example, Steuben County has an abundance of gravel. Branch County also has an abundance, but the proper grades are not evenly distributed over the county in relation to the need for

* Financial support which made this study possible was supplied by the Joint Highway Research Project administered by Purdue University, and by the Graduate School of Indiana University.

**Fig. 1.**

these various grades. The result is that long hauls become necessary. If the gravel nearby were used in each case it would mean the exhaustion of certain grades. On the other hand, gravel is scarce in the south half of Williams County. The result is that most of it used there is brought in from Defiance County which is immediately south or from other locations. Another failure to eliminate non-administrative differences because of close proximity resulted from the presence of a great many lakes in Steuben and Branch Counties. For example, thousands of vehicles use the roads in the summers in Steuben County but it receives no added income because these vehicles are registered elsewhere. Consequently, Steuben's share of the state-distributed motor vehicle fund, based on registration of motor vehicles, is less than the travel in the county deserves. On the other hand, Williams County, with practically no summer vacation attractions, can depend upon motor vehicle registrations to secure its fair share of registration fees.

Before describing the organization of each county it will be in order to state what the purpose of the survey was. The first was to

find what was being done. The second was to see what the problems are and to find how to study them. We were looking more for ways of going about the study of county administration than we were to find all the answers. In the third place, it was determined that if we found means of improvement we would suggest them.

THE COUNTY ORGANIZATIONS

The organization of the highway department in Steuben County appears at first glance to be more simple than that of either of the other counties. Three county commissioners are elected for a three-year staggered term. They constitute the body for executing the state policy with respect to most county matters. Their financial powers are subject to approval by the county council, another popularly-elected seven-member body.

As a part of the function to manage county business, the board of commissioners is charged with responsibility for the care of the county highways. The statutes do not make it clear whether the board of county commissioners is to assume the role customarily exercised

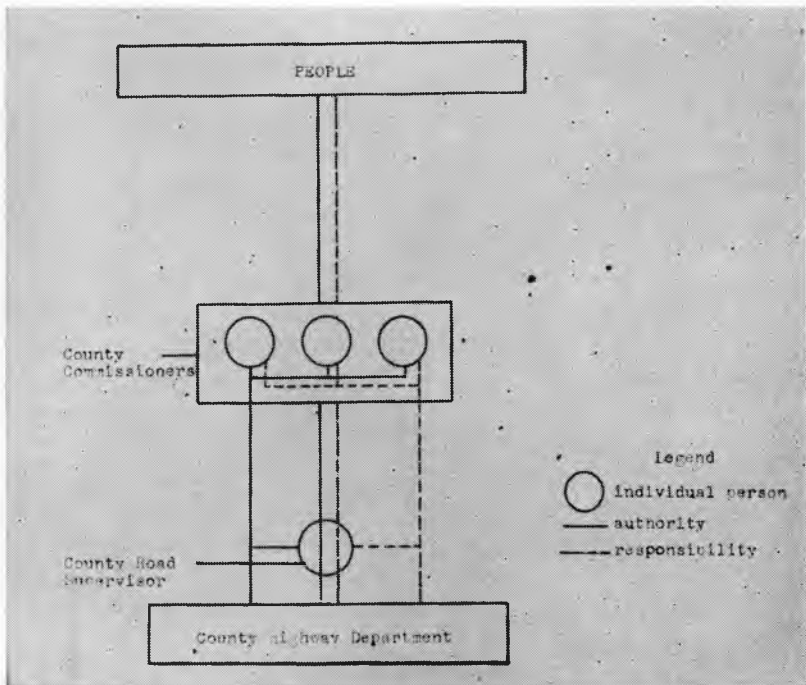


Fig. 2. Steuben County Indiana Highway Department.

by a board of directors, that is, to select a general manager, to formulate policy for him to execute and to check to see if he has done his work, or if the members of the board are individually to execute the plans. Some of the statutes seem to indicate that the surveyor or, if the board of commissioners selects a supervisor in his place, the supervisor is to manage the road department under the direction of the board of commissioners. Other statutes make it appear that the members of the board of commissioners are to be individually concerned with these duties. The result is confusion.

Another source of confusion is usage, which developed under the early statutes. A statute of 1905, which directed the board of commissioners to divide the roads of the county into three districts with approximately equal mileage, is a source of this usage. Each commissioner was then to have "entire charge of the district" assigned to him. He was directed to "employ all labor and make all contracts necessary to keep the district under his control in repair . . . [and to] oversee and superintend the labor employed and see that faithful work . . . [was] done." The kind of organization which that statute envisaged still persists.

What started to be a simple organization, like any business with a board of directors and a manager to direct a road crew, turned out to be a complicated arrangement with the lines of authority mixed, the workers having more than one boss and with the county road supervisor not knowing on all occasions whether he is to carry out the orders of the whole board or the orders of individual members of the board. This kind of situation prevents the board of commissioners from performing their true function—over-all long-term planning. They get bogged down with details. They have no time to see the county system of roads as a whole. A commissioner of highways in another state once observed that occasionally he took his engineers up in an airplane so that they could see their highways as one system. When three busy men have to spend several hours every month, each signing his name to every claim for every item purchased during the month by the highway department, regardless of how small the purchase is, those men are not going to have time to see the roads in their county as one complete unit, the conveyor belt serving the people of that area.

I must hasten to add that this peculiar time-wasting, attention-dissipating, energy-using, irritating chore is not a peculiarity of Indiana. The county boards in both Michigan and Ohio are also required by law to practice this same name-writing exercise. On the other hand, in Michigan and Ohio, particularly in Michigan, it has

the appearance of vestigial remains, while in Indiana it is more nearly symbolical of the failure of the law to distinguish between trivia and basic principles.

The Michigan County road organization appears more complex on paper, but in practice the lines of authority and responsibility are clear. Michigan, having been settled by persons from New York and the New England area, has its rural local government modeled after

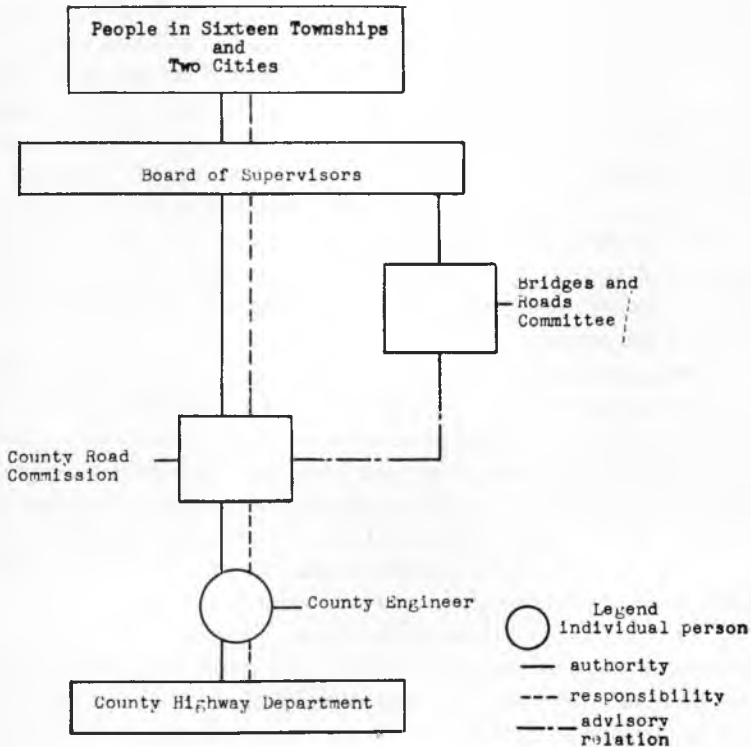


Fig. 3. Branch County Michigan Highway Department.

that of the northeast. Consequently, the town or, as it is called in the middle west, the township is a basic unit of rural government. Each township elects a board. The chairman of that board is called the township supervisor. He also, by virtue of his chairmanship of the township board, is a member of the county board of supervisors. Urban places also have representation on the county board. The Branch County board of supervisors has a total membership of twenty-two, sixteen township supervisors and six elected from two cities—Coldwater and Bronson.

The county roads are the responsibility of the County Road Commission. The membership of this commission is either elected or appointed by the Board of County Supervisors. In Branch County, the County Board of Supervisors selects it. The term of office is six years. The County Road Commission selects an engineer to manage the roads. The engineer employs the road crew. In 1951 a statute made an annual grant of \$5,000 to each county, provided it employed a registered professional engineer.

The County Board of Supervisors maintains both direct and indirect contact with the Board of County Road Commissioners. The Supervisors meet quarterly, at which time the road commission reports to it. The Supervisors also have a Roads and Bridges Committee which is supposed to maintain contact with the road commission in the intervals between meetings.

There is also a more or less constant informal contact maintained between the individual members of the County Board of Supervisors and the individual members of the road commission and the engineer. It appears that the contacts are useful for informative purposes. By means of them, the road commission and the engineer are better able to judge how well their efforts are being received.

It is required by statute that the county roads be classified into two groups, primary and local. Primary roads are of most importance to the county, those connecting points of traffic interest, urban places, state roads, and in sparsely populated places they are not to be more than three or four miles apart. All other county roads are to be classified then as local roads. The importance of this classification will be referred to again when we consider finance.

In Williams County, Ohio, both the county and the township still continue to exercise road functions. The mileage of roads in each jurisdiction is approximately equal, with 336.7 miles in the county system to 339.99 miles in the township system.

Each township has three trustees and a clerk. This board is responsible for the township roads. It employs day laborers to haul gravel, mow weeds, and blade the roads. With the exception of one short stretch, the township roads are gravel or of lower grade. Practice varies from township to township. Occasionally the three trustees act as a board, the laborer reporting to it. More often each of the trustees assumes the responsibility for the roads in his section of the township. Most of the townships own a grader, a truck and other equipment. It appears from the figures available that the capital invested in township equipment amounts to about as much as that invested in equipment by the county.

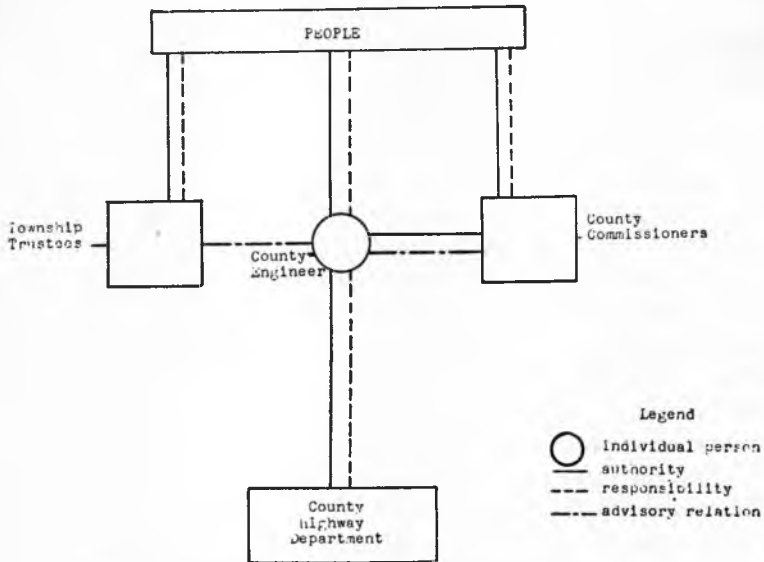


Fig. 4. Williams County Ohio Highway Department.

The county highway organization is two-headed. In the first place, there is the Board of County Commissioners, composed of three popularly elected persons. The Board has general responsibility for county property and, within the limits set by the state legislature, establishes policies for the county, including the county highway system. The other organizational head is the county engineer, also popularly elected and for the same term of office as the commissioners, four years. He employs the highway crew and performs the day-to-day managerial functions.

The capacity of human beings to adjust to difficult conditions seems to be almost unlimited. Sometimes people go along with an impossible organizational relation and do a good job. So it is in Williams County. The legislature established an impossible county highway organization. Two independent agencies, the Board of Commissioners and the county engineer, are supposed to work along together, but they are given functions to perform which inevitably create a superior-subordinate relationship. The commissioners are supposed to form policy, appropriate money, approve expenditures and check to see whether the work is done as planned. The engineer is charged with executing the policy, collecting information, informing the commissioners, and giving them the benefit of expert advice. Yet he is not selected by them and is not answerable to them. In spite of this, roads are built and maintained in a satisfactory manner.

Why are good results obtained in face of an organization which should break down? Among others, three explanations may be offered. The first is that the inherent goodness of men enables them to rise above obstacles in the performance of their jobs. The commissioners and the engineer want to do a good job and they are doing it. In the second place, all of them are members of the same political party. The invisible ties of party are sometimes strong enough to make up for the weaknesses of legal organization. Party allegiance may help to draw men together where the law tries to separate them. In the third place, there are no great strong opposing interests in the county. The county is chiefly devoted to agriculture; interests appear to be relatively similar; no opposed groups are seeking to get things each for itself, each trying to capture the engineer's office or positions on the Board of Commissioners. Were antagonistic interests to emerge as a result of a large amount of industrialization in the county, or should a shift in the composition of the population occur, it would be likely that legal separation of the policy-formers from the executive would destroy the present effectiveness of the county highway administration.

FINANCE

With respect to finance, there are both differences and similarities among the three counties. All three of them depend upon state-distributed funds which are derived from highway-user imposts, that is, gasoline taxes and registration fees. Practically all of Steuben County's money comes from this source.

However, the classification of roads in effect in the other two counties provides a basis for other sources of funds than the state motor vehicle fund. Branch County (Michigan) roads are classified into two groups, primary and local. Only twenty-five per cent of the state-distributed highway-user imposts can be spent on local roads. The townships are empowered to levy a property tax and to use funds from other sources to increase the amount of money available for the local roads. During the years 1950-51, the 16 townships contributed an average of \$48,482.31 to the road fund, or at the rate of \$3,031.44 per township.

Roads are also classified in Williams County, Ohio, but by an indirect means. What would be called local roads in Michigan are those under the jurisdiction of the townships in Ohio. Each township receives a flat sum for use on its roads. In 1951 it was \$5,200. But the townships are permitted to add to this from property tax and

other sources. In 1951, the 12 Williams County townships received \$62,807.12 from the state tax distribution, but they spent \$99,446.28, or an average of \$3,053.25 more per township than they received from the state gas tax.

It may be suggested in passing that limiting the amount of money which can be spent on roads of tertiary importance, such as the local roads in Michigan, or the township roads in Ohio, seems to be wise. For when a road is used only by a person whose land lies adjacent, it is difficult to gauge the amount of money which should be diverted from heavier traveled roads which are paid for by the user to these roads which cost so much more than their users contribute to their upkeep through their payments of gasoline taxes and other fees. It seems to be a sound principle to limit desire by confronting it with the cost.

County commissioners in Indiana do not have the advantage of state law, or road classifications to help them when they try to allocate money to specific roads in proportion to the traffic on them. John Doe may be the only person who regularly used the last mile of Spring Pike, but he may have so much influence in the county that the commissioners may be compelled to direct that twice the amount of money be spent on that mile of road than is spent on another mile which carries ten times as much traffic.

When we compare the amounts of money available in the three counties we find startling results. The following figures are substantially accurate but not absolutely, particularly with respect to Williams County. For example, in that county the engineer has other functions to perform in addition to his management of the highways and his expenditures for these other functions, such as the maintenance of drains, are not completely segregated. However, the figures are sufficiently accurate to show relations. During the six-year period, 1946-51 inclusive, the average annual expenditure per mile of road is: Steuben County, \$204.74; Branch County, \$387.02; Williams County, \$760.78. These figures need a little examination. When the classification of roads in Branch County is taken into consideration and assuming that the division of money between the local and primary roads has been in the proportions established by the 1951 statute, then Branch County has spent \$852.93 per mile of primary road. This compares with the \$760.78 expenditure on a similar class of road in Williams County. The expenditure of \$760.78 per mile by Williams County, however, is not comparable to the per mile costs in the other counties since this is for approximately half the mileage of the local rural roads in the county. To make it comparable, we need to find

the total cost of township and county roads in Williams County. When we do this, we find that Williams spent in 1951 \$693.86 per mile on its local roads, that is, township and county.

However, after all the analyses, the juggling of figures, and the statistical treatment, the fact still remains that Branch County had in 1951 approximately one and nine-tenths times more money to spend per mile on its roads as did Steuben County, and Williams County had more than three and four-tenths times as much money to spend as did Steuben County. Neither can all the preaching since Adam obscure the fact that Williams County had the best roads of the three. Money talks. Furthermore, one can talk about efficiency and he can reorganize, but after all that is done, it seems certain that Steuben County will have to have more money if it is to have roads equal to those in Branch and Williams Counties. If you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, you can't make roads out of beautiful sunshine.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Some things strike one immediately after he begins to study county highway administration. The first is the profound influence of the law. The policy or lack of policy established by the legislature sets the limits within which the road men must work. If the policy is not clear, if it is patchwork, if its provisions are contradictory, then the men in the counties have their hands tied. They are pressed down by a low ceiling. On the other hand, if the legislature starts with the assumption that a well-integrated system of highways is essential and sets up a policy which is clear, the parts of which are consistent, then, if sufficient finance is available, it becomes possible for the men in the counties to do a good job.

This alone will not guarantee good roads, but this makes it possible for the men to do a good job.

But the task of establishing a clear, concise and sound local rural road policy is not simple. It can't be done by sitting down with a pair of scissors and a bottle of paste to cut the statutes up and to paste them together in a different way. It is true one could improve the statutes of Indiana by cutting them up and pasting them together again but that does not answer questions about what the functions of the present-day roads should be. Questions respecting the purposes of roads must be faced and answered. We will have to decide whether local rural roads are mere conveniences or if they are the links in the conveyor belt of the present-day American economy. Are all local rural roads of equal value or are some of them more important than

others? Should there be any relation between the use of roads and the cost of their maintenance?

A second set of questions with respect to the procedures for carrying on highway work also should be answered. Is the maintenance work to be done in the most effective way possible or is road maintenance a by-product of some other activity? That is, are we trying to find work for some men to do to keep them out of the trustees' hands or off the county welfare rolls or are we trying to maintain roads? Again, are we trying to maintain roads or are we trying to build a party organization so we can win the next election? If these other things are more important, then whether we build roads or not is not so important. But if the primary project is to build and maintain roads, then the statutes must be written to attain that end.

There are two problems involved in the kind of codification of the statutes I am talking about. The first is to find what the purposes are, both with respect to the function of the roads and the procedure to achieve this function. The second is to describe this decision in clear, simple, terse language. Ordinarily it is assumed that defining the function of the highways is a job for the legislature, but the job of the legislature is not to originate policy. Its job is to approve or disapprove the proposals that are prepared for it.

The question then becomes, How can a well-considered proposal be prepared for the legislature? It can be done in several ways. One is for the legislature to establish a body to study and report to it. But this procedure has not been particularly successful in the last thirty years in Indiana. Between 1920 and 1940, thirty-two such boards, or as they were called, commissions, were established; in the 1951 session of the legislature eleven commissions were set up. Five of them were given \$97,500 with which to work, and six were given no funds. Sometimes this device has been used as a means of delay. Other times the commissions have not been able to secure the kind of assistance they need in collecting information and some of them have been able to do well.

A second procedure is for interest groups to do the spade work in preparing a proposal for the legislature. Some of these groups may be official and some of them may be private. The county commissioners might well take the lead. Private groups could include the manufacturers, the truckmen, the labor organizations, the automobile association, and the Farm Bureau. Whether it be an official commission or an unofficial group which may be charged with the preparation of a draft proposal for the legislature, the crucial point is collecting

and analysing the necessary information for it. The job of the men composing the body is to exercise their judgment. They will do this well, provided they have the information supplied to them upon which they can base their judgment. They will not themselves have the time to collect the information. Whether or not the facts are collected and analyzed makes the difference in most cases between the success or the failure of a commission.

The second problem, the preparation of the proposal in statutory form—codification of law already in existence which should be continued and the formation of new law—is not as difficult as the first step, making decisions as to what is to be done, but it is as essential. This is a job which cannot be done by the men who compose the commission. It is a job for an expert, but it should be done under the guidance of the commission.

The financial support necessary to prepare a proposal for the legislature may come from public or private sources. It is perfectly proper for such a charge to be made against public funds. It may be simply a matter of timing, whether public or private funds are sought. The legislature is not now in session and probably will not be for any extended period for nearly two years. Further, there may not be public funds which can be used for such a purpose until the legislature meets. So, in the interests of speed, the use of private funds should be considered. If it could be demonstrated that the interest groups would get together and earnestly consider the problem of local rural roads, it is likely that private funds could be secured to pay the necessary costs.

There are a number of other recommendations which arise from a year of study of county highway administration. These are being prepared in some detail to be filed with the Joint Highway Research Project at Purdue University. For example, it seems to me that the whole purchasing process needs a re-evaluation. It may be possible to improve the procedure for securing competitive bids. If the description of all items purchased on bids and the cost of each were collected and published, a kind of market price might be established so that the county supervisors and their boards of commissioners could better evaluate bids submitted to them. In large operations, engineers' estimates can be prepared. This provides a basis for evaluation of bids, but this does not seem possible in a normal county. It does seem possible, however, for the county supervisor to look at the reports from other counties and inform his board whether bids submitted to them appear to be out of line.

Another example of a thing which should be done, in my opinion, and which has been hinted at earlier in this discussion, is the classification of local rural roads. Ohio is ahead of Indiana with respect to this, although it is ahead in classification because it is behind in its handling of the basic units for local road management. But Michigan is ahead of both Indiana and Ohio with respect to its classification of roads. It seems to me that the whole problem of rural local road classification needs further study.

However, these things do not need further discussion at this point. If my first suggestion were followed, the state law with respect to local roads being brought up to date, most of these things would be considered.

There is one thing, however, which will not appear in any law or will likely not appear in any report on highway administration. This is a tribute to the office of the county commissioner in Indiana.

It is the style these days to criticize the work of road men. We hear complaints that the present roads are too narrow, that they were not built to hold up present-day traffic, that the road men had no vision, that they were wasteful because they did not build better, stronger, straighter roads in the first place. But these very criticisms are in themselves tributes. The wear on the road of today is of itself evidence that the road was used and to say that it is too narrow shows how badly it was needed and to compliment the men who improved it. The crowded highways of today were dirt roads 40 years ago and the men who transformed them into a way good enough to attract a substantial portion of the transportation of the present-day economic life showed genius, not ineptitude. The facts are that roads produce wealth. They are as much a means of production as factories or farms. They are the conveyor belt which keeps the modern assembly line moving. Highways belong to the whole people. They are a common possession. They contribute to the general welfare. Every man is happier, safer, wealthier, because of them. They are vital, because through them the country is able to produce more and it is by them that this nation has actually become a united people, one nation indivisible.

It has been the high privilege of the county commissioner to contribute to this achievement. His work has been done quietly and without fanfare. His role has been humble service. His pay, satisfaction from the job he has done. But the job that has been done, regardless of whether it was done poorly or well, will soon be forgotten. What lies before is more startling and momentous than that

which lies behind. The country is in its infancy ; our people are just becoming aware of their strength.

You who have seen the development of the motor vehicle, the birth of the radio and the television have not seen anything compared to what is to come. The inventive genius of our people is yet in the bud state. What effect this will have on our industrial plants, the places where we live, the things we will consume, the expanded need for transportation cannot now be comprehended. But the responsibility of the officials in the days that lie ahead will be titantic. The times to come will demand the best that is in us and more. Only by dedication and devotion to work entrusted to us can we rise to the responsibilities of the high service ahead of us.